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A High Frequency GaAlAs Travelling Wave Electro-Optic Modulator at 0.82 μm

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A HIGH FREQUENCY GaAlAs TRAVELLING WAVE ELECTRO-OPTIC MODULATOR AT 0.82 μm

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SUMMARY

Experimental GaAlAs modulators operating at 0.82 μm using a Mach-Zehnder interferometer configuration were designed and fabricated. Coplanar 50 Ω travelling wave microwave electrodes were used to obtain a bandwidth-length product of 11.95 GHz-cm. The design, fabrication and DC performance of the GaAlAs travelling wave modulator is presented.

INTRODUCTION

The development of high frequency integrated microwave-optical components and circuits on GaAs substrates is required for highly agile and light weight optically controlled GaAs MMIC based phased array antennas for future space communication and tracking systems (ref. 1). External modulation of a GaAlAs solid state laser output by a modulator is a means to convert a microwave signal to an optical signal, thus allowing the benefits of low weight and low crosstalk to be applied to these systems.

Waveguide electro-optic indirect modulators fabricated on $LiNbO_3$ and GaAs substrates and operating at 1.3 μm have previously been reported in the literature (refs. 2 to 4). It is unlikely that with the present technology, $LiNbO_3$ modulators can easily be integrated with the present day GaAs MMIC substrates. On the other hand, GaAs modulators cannot be integrated with GaAlAs laser sources due to high absorption of the GaAs at 0.82 μm wavelength.

In this paper, we present the fabrication of a triple heterostructure GaAlAs travelling wave electro-optic modulator which operates at 0.82 μm wavelength and avoids the absorption problems associated with pure GaAs. The detailed analysis and design of the electro-optic modulator has been previously reported (refs. 5 and 6). The modulator uses a 50 Ω travelling wave coplanar waveguide electrode and needs no matching network. It has a high bandwidth and is capable of integration with GaAs/GaAlAs laser diodes. Although GaAs has a smaller electro-optic coefficient and requires higher microwave drive power levels than $LiNbO_3$, the modulator presented here allows true integration with GaAs MMIC technology.

DESIGN OF THE MODULATOR

The electro-optic modulator, shown schematically in figure 1, is comprised of two essential components: (a) the optical waveguide Mach-Zehnder interferometer and (b) the microwave coplanar waveguide.

A material problem associated with 0.82 μm operation of GaAs modulator is that GaAs is highly absorptive at this wavelength. This is avoided by the substitution of a small percentage of aluminum to form GaAlAs which shifts the absorption edge of the compound semiconductor to shorter wavelengths. In the design of the present modulator, aluminum concentrations greater than 10 percent were chosen so that all three GaAlAs layers are transparent at 0.82 μm. In determining the response of the modulator, the electro-optic coefficie for GaAs is used in the assumption that the small percentage of the aluminum does not significantly alter the electro-optic coefficient.

Optical propagation losses in semiconductor waveguides are also a disadvantage of GaAs modulators. In our design, a strip loaded ridge structure was chosen for the optical waveguide. Three layers of GaAlAs with differing aluminum concentrations were grown over a semi-insulating substrate (fig. 2). The upper layer was etched to form the loading ridge, but the optical signal propagates in the middle layer. This configuration concentrates the light energy away from the etched edges of the loading ridge, reducing the intensity of light scattered by the edges and therefore reducing the propagation losses. To prevent additional losses, the first layer above the semi-insulating GaAs is chosen to be thick enough so that the signal will not extend into the substrate and be absorbed by the GaAs.

To provide the microwave field in the required orientation, a coplanar travelling wave electrode structure was chosen. The electrodes were designed for 50 Ω impedance on semi-insulating GaAs. Since there is no doping in any layer, the low intrinsic carrier concentration of GaAs allows the substrate to be treated as a dielectric. The absence of ohmic and rectifying behavior makes the transmission line electrodes possible. The conductor and gap widths are chosen to provide the 50 Ω characteristic impedance. The greatest advantage in choosing the coplanar transmission line structure is the elimination of the matching networks throughout the operating bandwidth of the modulator.

The bandwidth of the proposed device is determined by the walkoff between the light and microwave signal which propagates through the device at different velocities. The calculated 3 dB bandwidth-length product of the 11.95 GHz-cm is for full scale intensity modulation without any optimization of the waveguiding structure. This may further be accomplished by finding the proper coplanar waveguide dimensions so that the propagation constant of the microwave signal can be brought closer to that of the optical signal. If the modulation depth is reduced, the corresponding bandwidth-length product is increased.

FABRICATION

The modulator was fabricated in a three layer $Ga_{1-x}Al_xAs$ heterostructure grown on a semi-insulating GaAs substrate. The GaAlAs layers were grown by MBE at Perkin Elmer and consisted of a 3.5-μm thick lower cladding layer of $Ga_{.87}Al_{.13}As$, a 0.8-μm thick middle guiding layer of $Ga_{.90}Al_{.10}As$, and an

0.8-μm thick top cladding layer of $Ga_{.87}Al_{.13}As$. The entire GaAlAs heterostructure was capped by 100 A of GaAs for protection prior to fabrication.

Fabrication took place by standard photolithography using an E-beam generated mask. The waveguiding ridges were defined by wet chemical etching in a solution of $H_3PO_4:H_2O_2:H_2O::3:1:25$ to a ridge height of 1400 A. The "Y" branch of the interferometer was defined to a feature size of <1 μm (fig. 2) and the edges of the waveguiding ridges were generally smooth and clean (fig. 3). The travelling waveguide electrode pattern was produced by liftoff techniques using E-beam evaporated metals. Two types of electrodes were applied: rectifying, Schottky (Ti/Au,AU) and ohmic (Au/Ge, Ni, Au).

MODULATOR CHARACTERISTICS

Testing of the modulator is accomplished by butt coupling of the laser radiation to the cleaved end facet of the device from a single mode optical fiber pig-tailed to a GaAlAs laser diode (Ortel-SL620s). The output facet of the modulator is imaged by an IR sensitive camera and displayed on a video monitor. Successful coupling to the modulator produces a single intensity peak at the output facet with little lateral leakage observable. A modulator cleaved midway along the parallel branches of the Mach-Zehnder interferometer shows two intensity peaks, one under each optical waveguide (fig. 4).

DC measurements on modulators have shown that the turn-off voltage, Vp, is approximately 30 V.

CONCLUSION

A GaAlAs electro-optic Mach-Zehnder modulator operating at 0.82 μm has been designed and fabricated. Because the waveguiding layer is transparent at 0.82 μm the design is potentially integratable with a GaAlAs laser diode. Theoretical calculations indicate a 3 dB bandwidth-length product of 11.95 GHz-cm for 100 percent modulation depth.

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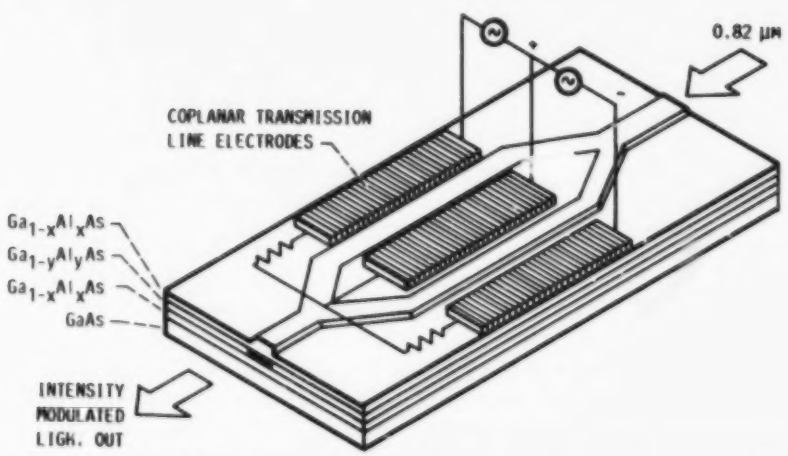

FIGURE 1. - SCHEMATIC VIEW OF GaAlAs MACH-ZAHNDER ELECTRO-OPTIC MODULATOR. DIMENSIONS OF COPLANAR WAVEGUIDE ARE CHOSEN FOR 50Ω CHARACTERISTIC IMPEDANCE.

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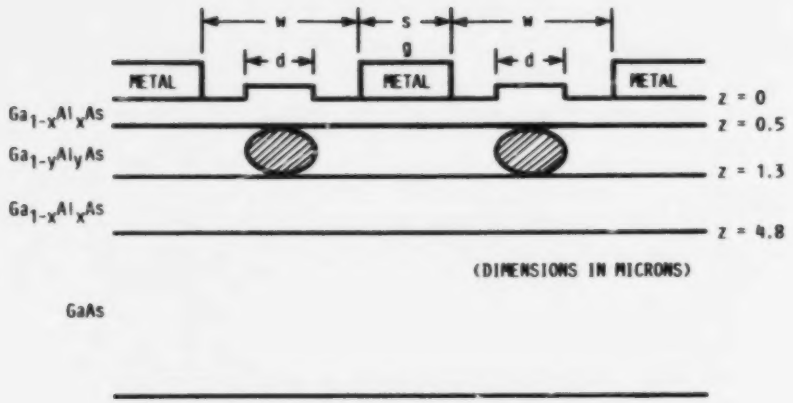

FIGURE 2.- CROSS-SECTIONAL SCHEMATIC OF MODULATOR STRUCTURE.

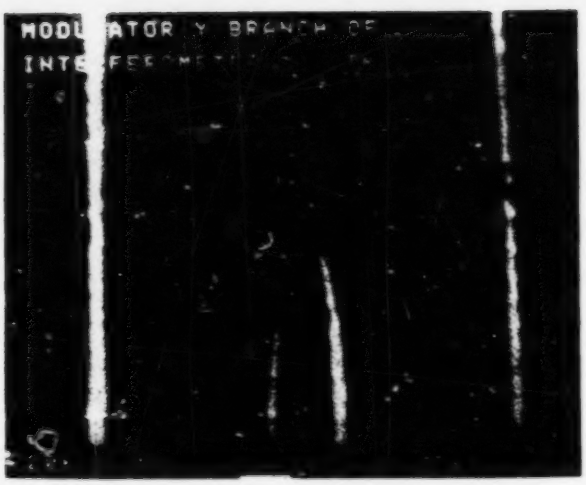

FIGURE 3. - "Y" BRANCH OF MACH-ZEHNDER INTERFEROMETER. GAP BETWEEN BRANCHES IS APPROXIMATELY 1 μm AT IT'S NARROWEST POINT.

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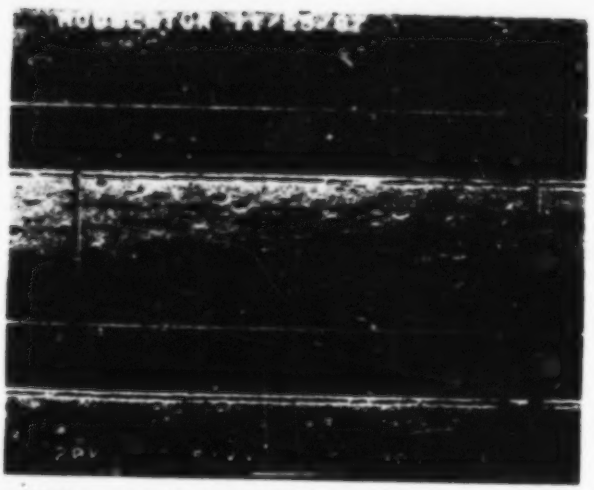

FIGURE 4. - PARALLEL WAVEGUIDES OF INTERFEROMETER WITH COPLANAR ELECTRODES. EDGES OF WAVEGUIDES ARE GENERALLY SMOOTH AND FREE OF DEFECTS.

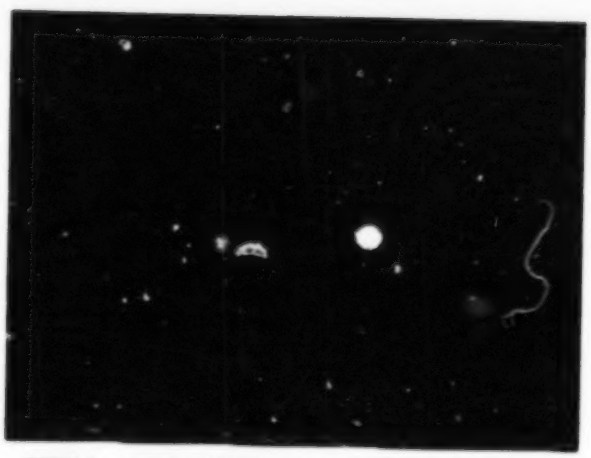

FIGURE 5. - OUTPUT OF MODULATOR CLEAVED MIDWAY ALONG INTERFEROMETER. EACH OF THE INTENSITY PEAKS LIES UNDER ONE OF THE PARALLEL WAVEGUIDES.

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16. Abstract

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